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THE ASSIGNMENT OF ESSAY SUBJECTS

“WHATSOEVER a man soweth that shall he also reap,” is nowhere truer than it is in the teaching of English composition, so far as bad reaping is concerned, at any rate. On all sides we hear that the teaching of writing does not succeed in teaching students to write, and everywhere we see the efforts that are being made to get better results. But there is something more in the quotation than the lugubrious warning writ large; there is the promise, only recently discovered and applied by teachers of composition, that a man’s *good* sowing shall be rewarded—to make the application at once—that a proper preparation for excellent writing will be followed by excellence in writing. It is this hopeful word that is to be the theme of the present paper. The proper preparation can mean only one thing of course, the giving of such a subject, and the putting of the student into such relationship with it, as will make him eager to write and convinced of the necessity of writing. In general, then, to bring forth fresh, enthusiastic, original writing, the subject assigned must be interesting to the student; in order to call for his best, sincerest effort, it must be of certain dignity and integrity, must seem to him to have some reason for being; to provide for his acting in good faith—writing with care and expressing genuine feelings—it must be judged good or bad not according to some text-book standard, but as it stands or falls when put to the actual test. This is saying, in short, that the essay subject ought to be on something that is near the student’s interests, that it ought to be attractively stated, addressed to a reasonably natural audience, and criticised by that audience, or from the point of view of that audience.

Joseph V. Denny thinks that the actual subject assigned for any particular task is not so important as the manner in which it is assigned, and the majority of people who have experimented will probably agree with him heartily.

The choice of topics for composition [he says] is not so important as the way in which they are stated and conditioned. If our object is to train the power of seeing and expressing relations, of grasping in imagination the meaning and total significance of a number of details, the statement of the topics should, if possible, suggest a typical situation in real life. And if we wish to enlist the personal interest of the writer in his work, the statement of the topics should suggest a personal relationship to the situation, on the part of the one who is to write. Moreover, it should suggest a particular reader or set of readers who are to be brought into vital relationship with the situation. Pupils require the definite statement of these things in the topics, in order to form the habit of forethought, or writing with a purpose, of choosing an advantageous point of attack. The composition topic that suggests a problem for solution calls into activity all the resources of the pupil. It compels the pupil to recognize the specific character of the situation. It invites him to forethought, requires him to select wisely and to grasp the situation, or a related set of circumstances, in imagination. It involves him as part of the situation, furnishes him with a point of view and a purpose, and reminds him of the hearer to whom he must direct his words.¹

I should say, that to get the best results, the writer should bear more than a personal relationship to the situation, situation meaning, of course, the person written to, the occasion for the writing, and the point of view of the writer. It is not enough that he be involved as part of the situation; he ought to be master of it, creator of it, if possible. Only then is he sure of himself, independent and free, and only under these circumstances will he keep his audience first in mind and forget his teacher, or the class which he thinks will be likely to hear the essay read. It is the ideal relationship. When the student is the originator and owner of the situation, then it is his to deal with as he likes; it is his child, he naturally has the most tender and enduring interest in it. Responsibility and freedom at the same time seem to me to be necessary to all good writing, and both arise from the attitude of the writer toward the subject. If he is master of the situation, he has at once the responsibility and freedom of mastership; responsibility, involving earnest desire and intelligent activity toward the reaching of the end in view, and stimulative of originality, ingenuity and foresight; and freedom, involving perfect familiarity with the situation and perfect fearlessness and confidence in handling it.

¹ JOSEPH V. DENNY, *Two Problems in Composition Teaching*, in "Contributions to Rhetorical Theory" series, published by F. N. Scott, Ann Arbor, Mich.

There really seems to be no limit to the good that can be accomplished with a well-chosen audience and situation from the point of view of both the student and the teacher. For his part he loses no time, he goes to work quickly and intelligently, because he is at home as soon as he places the subject; the more at home he is, the more master of the situation, the more intelligently and quickly and interestedly he works, of course. The reason is not far to seek — he is doing the same things here that he is doing everywhere else in the world, talking with people to whom he would naturally talk, about things he constantly has occasion to talk of actually. Writing is placed where it is most intelligible to him, among the businesses of society. This is not a theoretical statement, that a good situation saves time. The students themselves testify that the task of writing is very considerably lessened for them, when they know why they are writing and for whom. Besides this, one can know certainly from observation that the difficulties are lessened for a great majority of them by a proper placing of the subject. When themes are given out to be written in class and there is a preliminary talk about the person to be addressed, they go to work quickly and in a business like way; those who sit staring at the paper are really few and far between, and generally of that class of students to whom exertion of any kind is always distasteful. The saving of time, however, is not the most important gain to the student; there is the saving of his *feelings*, the immense economy of that nervous energy that goes into the making up and worrying out of an uninteresting essay. Then, most important of all, there is the positive gain in mental strength that comes from the stimulating effect of congenial occupation.

From the point of view of the teacher, the proper conditioning of the essay subject is indeed a great boon. It sometimes accomplishes marvelous results in the student's writing, reaching faults that could not be reached by repeated criticism, and putting life and tone into the dreariest of perfunctory pages. This is also not a theoretical statement, although it rests on sound principles, but a statement of fact, as the writer could venture to assert from her own experience, even if testimony from other

people were lacking. Notice, for instance, how the two themes quoted below prove the statement in regard to the advantage of the situation from both points of view. The first was written by a student noticeably below the average in the class, the other by a student who was good in all her work, but of no particular ability in writing.

GOOD NATURE AND UNSELFISHNESS

"What was it you said about Jack?"

"I said he was altogether too good-natured. This is only one scrape out of a hundred he has plunged me into just by his everlasting good nature. Yesterday someone mentioned getting up a tennis club. Jack immediately acquiesced, and suggested that they meet at our house tomorrow afternoon.

"The courts are all laid out, you know, and it won't take Bess but a minute to make us some lemonade, *et cetera*." He told me just half-past eleven this morning that the people were coming at three o'clock this afternoon, and "You know, Bess, they really must have some good things to eat."

"But," I said, "how can I prepare for them at this short notice?" "Oh, I'll just run over to the grocery and get the necessary things, and I'll squeeze the lemons and all those little things. It will only take us a minute to get ready for them."

"But where is Jack?"

"Oh, he has forgotten all about it, and has gone off on a horseback ride, leaving word with mother to tell Bess that if the people come before he gets back to give them the balls and rackets and tell them to start in playing. You see, if it hadn't been for Paul I should have been in an awful scrape. But he stepped in and worked like a Trojan. There he goes now with a pail of lime to re-mark the court. If it were not for Paul I don't know where our family reputation would be. But I do wish he would impose upon other people a little more and have some of the fun Jack gets out of life. I am sure Jack could spare a little.

"And yet isn't it queer that everyone likes Jack better than Paul?"

"I don't know. It seems to me that a good-natured person is invariably liked better than an unselfish person. Unselfishness becomes wearisome at times, but good nature can almost always be endured. If everyone had Jack's disposition it would be a happier world, but I don't believe we should accomplish as much."

The theme was thoroughly enjoyed by the class, who praised it for its spontaneity and naturalness and for the appropriateness of the situation to express just what the writer wanted to express, and criticised adversely nothing but the moralizing at the end. They thought that the fond, half-irritated, half-amused sister

would be very likely to talk in this way; they even considered the names Jack, Paul, and Bess admirably fitted to the characters described. The writer modestly refused to take any credit to herself, however, for good work, and insisted: "Why, it isn't well done—it's just *true*. That sort of thing has happened a hundred times in our family."

The other essay was on "The Value of a College Education," and when it was first given out for suggestions as to treatment a genuine audience and occasion was presented to one of the students. It seems that she had a boy cousin of some sixteen or seventeen years of age, who had taken it into his head that he did not want to go to college, although he was well prepared and nobody had ever thought for a moment of his not going—it had been taken as a matter of course. The girl was anxious on her own account to have him go on, but more anxious because a much-beloved uncle and aunt of hers (and of the boy's too) were shocked and grieved at this sudden determination, but quite helpless, for they had exhausted all their arguments and the lad was still unmoved. He didn't want to go to college, didn't care for study; the one thing he did care for was athletics. It occurred suddenly and forcibly to the rather mature and conscientious freshman when this subject was given out, that possibly she might influence him, being a college girl and representing in a way the college world which had never sent any direct or indirect appeal to him. It was a genuine need, then, to which her essay sought to respond; the need had existed before the essay was thought of. The class recognized the genuineness of the situation immediately and tried its best to help her. They decided without much difficulty that the boy must be approached through his athletic interests and that she must keep studies and college duties pretty carefully in the background. A number of definite suggestions were made, some of which were accepted as valuable and some rejected without question, because of objectionable features. She was asked to give some idea of the boy's character, and the class decided that it might be well to flatter him delicately, but that he was a reasonable and sensible boy on the whole, and could be talked to seriously. The letter shows how the various suggestions were incorporated.

DEAR EUGENE: In the last newspaper which I received from home, I find an account of the great Buffalo-Bradford football game. There is, I see, special mention made of the excellent work done by Eugene Parker, center. The account even goes so far as to say that the victory of the Buffalonians is due to *your* cool-headed, forcible playing. Let me second the praise with a vigorous Bravo! and extend my heartiest congratulations, Eugene, for the success you have met with in the field. I imagine the entire high school pays you the homage due a hero. Of course you like it, in spite of your modesty; you would not be human otherwise.

When do you propose winning laurels like these at college? Let me see, you graduate in June from the high school, don't you? In the fall you will enter—well, which college? Is to be Cornell, Harvard, or Yale that will claim you? Just let me turn fortune-teller a few moments; I am confident I can prophesy pretty near the truth regarding your immediate future.

In the first place, in June, you will pass without any difficulty the college entrance examinations, which your course has well prepared you to take. In September, you will appear on the campus of your chosen college, and find yourself among a lot of fellows, all about your age, and just as replete with virtues, and faults, and exuberance of spirits as yourself. It will not be long before you will make a few good friends and many acquaintances. Your classmates will look upon you as an equal at first; when they observe your prowess in athletics, they will look up to and admire you. They will point you out on the campus to their friends with some such remark as: "There's Parker. '1904' has reason to be proud of him. He's on the team that's going to do Pennsylvania soon." You will find "going into training" quite to your liking. But this is not the only side of college life that will attract you.

I foresee that, though you are not to be one of the "sharks," you will manage to keep abreast of the average man in your class. Why? Because that level-headedness and persistence which serves you so well in football complications is just what is going to stand by you in unraveling the problems of college "math." and science. You will find the satisfaction and glory of triumphing along these lines just as great, though it may not appear so to you now. As your course continues you will gradually realize that these more serious things are going to pave the way for your future career.

When Class Day finally comes, and you are bidding farewell to the "dear old 'varsity" and your friends, you will reflect something in this wise:

"It *was* worth while to come to college. I am glad I entered into athletics, but I am still more glad that I stuck by the work. There's my father over there—how proud he looks! Besides, I'm armed; let the world advance!" Some such sentiments as these you will feel, though you may not formulate them.

Success to you, Eugene; and mark my words.

The exact subject assigned in the first place, "The Value of

a College Education," has been lost sight of unconsciously, and quite rightly. It is a subject twisted out of shape to meet the demands of a real need, and such an exercise is a thousand times more valuable than the writing of a merely perfunctory essay on the subject as given out. It is genuine, even to the statement of the receiving of a marked newspaper describing the football game; and when, after hearing it through with interest, the class praised it enthusiastically for its absolute sincerity of tone, the time and attention given to it seemed to have been not ill spent, for the students certainly realized as they probably never had done before, how excellent a thing it is to be sincere in writing.

The letter was sent as had been planned, and the boy's only comment at first, according to the aunt, was a grumbling objection that he wasn't center rush at all, he was left guard. The aunt thought he seemed to be impressed, however (she had been sent a copy of the letter), and she followed up the advantage by giving a dinner to him and his athletic friends who *were* going to college. Toasts were made and there was much excited talk about the various colleges chosen by the boys and the standing of each in regard to athletics. Toward the end of June the aunt sent word that they were all delighted with Eugene at last. He didn't say much, but he was apparently making all preparations to go to college.

It is interesting to note from this piece of writing how far a carefully worked out situation goes toward the writing of the essay, how many questions it settles definitely; the starting point always, and the end to be reached, and having these, the path from one to the other is usually pretty clear. The student knew here that she must begin with the one thing the boy would listen to, and bring him gradually to the distasteful things, but she saw that it would not be wise to stop there, she must get him through the difficulties, hence she takes him on to the pleasant end, his graduation day. Disagreeable studies are not dwelt on long, but neither are they tucked out of sight ignominiously and dishonestly; they are brought out fairly and squarely and disposed of as a football hero would have them disposed of, promptly

and energetically. She appeals to his fighting instinct and to his pride: "math," a thing to be met and overcome on the field of battle, is much less terrifying and much more interesting than "math," a study. Unconscious of rhetorical precepts, she nevertheless could not be criticised for lack of unity or selection or proportion or sequence; and although not striving for effect in the slightest degree, she has been effective, for sincerity and earnestness are bound to give dignity and forcefulness to any piece of writing.

A theme of this kind is immensely encouraging to a teacher because of its suggestiveness. It suggests, in the first place, a simple and adequate plan for the criticism of student composition. Has or has not the essay succeeded in reaching the person to whom it is addressed, and if not, why? What ideas ought to be added, what cut out? Why this word and not another? From the largest problems of outlining and arranging material down to the minutest details of structure and diction this questioning may be reasonably applied, and without any fear that the student will object to its "fussiness," or accept it resignedly because the teacher "wants" the thing said thus or so. The criticism is thoroughly impersonal—it arises from the needs of a third person—is consequently outside of teacher and pupil alike. One is just as well fitted to judge as the other usually. Other things being equal, the best judgment comes in every case from the one who has the completest knowledge of the character and temperament of the audience. Again a theme such as that quoted above is immensely encouraging to a teacher, because it suggests endless possibilities for the calling forth of good expression at the first writing. Theoretically it would seem that almost anything might be accomplished in writing by a proper conditioning of the thing to be written about. One can conceive of planning deliberately to reach a certain fault or supply a certain lack in the writing of an individual or of a class—plan to correct, for example, the almost universal fault of inaccuracy in seeing and thinking and in the expression of what is seen and thought by suggesting to the students that they write out the perception for somebody who depends on their

description for a true idea of the object. As "a description of my house for Sue, who is coming to see me next week. It happens that I can't meet her, and it will be impossible for her to see the number on the houses as she gets into town after sundown, so she will have to pick it out from my description." This situation happens to be an experience so often met in real life, that the necessity of exercising care seems perfectly reasonable and natural, and the letter to Sue cannot fail to be far beyond the student's ordinary writing in clearness and accuracy. If these qualities, therefore, may be planned for and produced, if, in the same way, ease and forcefulness of expression may be contracted for, there would seem to be no reason why, by increasing the demands of his audience and occasion, a student might not be brought to express himself effectively and excellently, even on most difficult subjects.

This method of planning beforehand to bring about good results in student writing it may be interesting to know, is used by the Department of English in the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.¹

In this school the natural demand of the student on the English Department is that it teach him the art of expression in written language for use in his technical work. . . . No essay made up of disconnected thoughts will serve him. In a system of philosophy there may be gaps between the stars, but there may not be one break in a system of water-works. . . . At a technical school, where organization is essential, any confusion of thought has to be met with peculiar rigor. English composition, like other arts of expression, is more open to this confusion than is work in acquiring learning where the science or language offers itself to the student, problem by problem, word by word. To gather ideas is in some ways easier than to make them properly depart. A difficulty in selection meets the student when he first seriously tries to write, and it remains a difficulty to the end. In order to lessen this, it has been found most helpful to place emphasis on three things: the reader, the subject, and the point of view. The need of thorough drill in these is nothing new. The special idea gained from the institute in connection with them is that they are really preliminary to a drill in the other principles of composition, that by an understanding of them at the start, much which would otherwise continually harass the student in his study of unity, coherence, emphasis will be unconsciously avoided.

¹ ROBERT G. VALENTINE, *Technology Review*, October 1899.

We are taking it for granted, of course, that the student "warms up" to the situation and audience and makes it a part of himself. This is the ideal state of affairs and not always, or perhaps one might more truthfully say, not often realized. It is probably unfortunately true that a large number of students in the class do not foster kindly the majority of situations made for them, or enter fully into the spirit of those they have made perfunctorily for themselves at the last moment. However, even a partial entering into the situation is better than no situation at all, and it is consoling to think, what is doubtless true, that the audience idea is one which gradually works its way through a class; that though it may be fully comprehended by only a few at first and perhaps objected to by some, it will inevitably impress its advantages upon the indifferent and unwilling, and bring them at last to write to an audience naturally and with pleasure. The teacher can do much to hasten the spread of the idea; he can always at the very least see to it that no audience assigned by him be so fatally unreasonable as to kill itself at the outset because there is no reason why it should live. A very ordinary imagination ought to save him from the mistake of dragging in an audience by the head and shoulders and expecting that the class will do anything else than accept it with silent disgust or open derision, and that the writing will be anything but forced and unnatural, on the one hand, or utterly insincere on the other. But if the teacher makes mistakes as he is bound to do (because no person's judgment is infallible) he can always read the signs of the times and decide at once that something is wrong with an audience that is received patiently but with unmistakable signs that the class is bored or indifferent, and he can avoid making that particular mistake again. He may not be able to turn aside then, although it would be worth his while to do so if at all possible, just for the sake of seeing the tide of pleasure and interest flow back into the faces before him. If one had the ingenuity, this would be the only way to assign an audience, mention one after another tentatively and never stop or be satisfied until the right look came into the faces of the class. The right look means unmistakably the right audience,

and that means inevitably that you will get the best and most enthusiastic efforts of the student.

But it is never safe to insist that the class as a whole write to any unchangeable audience, unless the instructor is aiming at some very definite result, and judges the accomplishment of this end so important, that rather than risk not gaining it, he will sacrifice the student's personal feelings. It stands to reason that the person actually written to and the particular occasion for writing must be supplied by each student for himself unless the audience given by the teacher be a real one, as in the case of exchanges between classes or schools or themes sent to an artist, from which the artist is to draw or paint the object. It can be seen of course that a situation definitely stated by the teacher must be a hypothetical situation to a student, and this seems unfortunate since it is undeniably true that a certain number of the audiences written to by the students are fictitious anyway. Two or three definite suggestions by the teacher as to the audience and occasion would be a good thing, I should say. From these the unimaginative could probably get ideas for situations of their own or make personal application of those suggested, and the imaginative could have all the joy and all the benefit that must come to them from making the unreal thing a reality. To provide for everyone's making a serious attempt at choosing the best possible situation, and for getting hold of a great deal of suggestive material, the plan of asking for a written statement of why and how and to whom each student is going to write is very valuable. I think I have never known two students in these statements to write to exactly the same audience or from exactly the same point of view. This is not saying that they all choose good and natural situations, for they choose very bad ones generally, especially at first; perhaps in a set of essays only one or two do noticeably well in this respect. The hopeful thing is that not the same students every time do the good work, by any means, and that a much larger number do good work at the end than did at the beginning.

After all is said and done, a good audience for a student's writing is an inspiration, a good subject for that matter, too, and

like all other inspirations it is rare and to be highly prized when it does come. Like inspirations again it is not to be found by diligent seeking, but is likely to come upon student or teacher most unexpectedly and unaccountably. But last and most important it comes most readily to open and impressionable minds, those that are quick to see resemblances and make comparisons and connections with outside interests, and it has this great advantage that one can often put himself into the right attitude of mind for its fitting reception and so possibly even induce it. A good imagination is necessary to this attitude, I should say, a proper sense of humor, a delicacy in interpreting the feelings of the students, a keenness in detecting the elements of which a class is made up and tact in avoiding its prejudices; possessions obviously, of a mind that can adapt itself readily to existing conditions, that can understand and appreciate the student's point of view on all occasions.

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